Lost History and Legend Along the Warriors' Path

By Jeremy B. Stout

The Warriors' Path
Photo by Jeremy Stout

Athia-mio-wee, as pronounced in the Cherokee language, literally translates into "the Path of the Armed One." This refers to what later became known to the European settlers as the Warriors' Path. The Warriors' Path was an ancient thoroughfare used by virtually all travelers through the Southern Appalachians, from the end of the Pleistocene epoch (the last great ice age, ending 11,000 years ago) all the way into the present day.

The original route had modest and very pragmatic origins. The story almost certainly dates to prehistory, when Paleo-Indians (those famed hunter-gatherers who cohabited the region with mastodons and saber-toothed cats) dispersed throughout the continent following the game trails of their prey. The trail originally followed troughs and valleys through the mountainous terrain.

As human occupation of the region progressed, those hunting routes became avenues of trade between villages. Most of the preserved history of the path began with the Woodland Indians, who were the largest group of people to have settled in Northeast Tennessee, until the arrival of Old World immigrants. It was the Cherokee, however, who made the route most famous, and who controlled it at the time of European colonization, although very few of them actually resided along it in the eastern part of the state (the region made up by East Tennessee, Western North Carolina, and Southwest Virginia, though highly cherished by the Cherokee, was not an area heavily utilized as residency).

Many years passed, and successive generations of Americans (both indigenous and colonial) traveled this wilderness road established so long ago. Unfortunately, though, just as award-winning and best-selling books today are rarely written about highways and thoroughfares, so too it was with the Warriors' Path of the east, and much of what we know today is actually recorded in the stories and legends of the area, rather than empirical historical evidence (though, of course, some intriguing archaeological finds do exist).

And in some cases, the historical research and documentation belong just as much to the realm of legend as to science or history. One noteworthy example of this is the supposed "lost race" of Moundbuilders in the New World. It was common practice in the 18th and 19th centuries to discredit the indigenous Americans by insinuating, and in some cases overtly stating, that the relic civilizations discovered in the Americas must have somehow been created by peoples other than the Native Americans. This notion gave birth to the idea of a lost race of people known as the Moundbuilders (after the large burial mounds excavated by early American scientists). Nearly every ancient culture, from refugees of the doomed Atlantis to the lost tribe of Israel, was attributed to the mounds, except, of course, the culture that actually created them!

Mounds were even excavated in what is now Warriors' Path State Park by the Smithsonian Institution in the late 19th century, and the record of them documented in the 5th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (1883-1884). This report marks the first phase of debunking the absurd "lost-race" hypothesis, though the author did have this to say of the Warriors' Path mounds:

"The thought that a mighty nation once occupied the great valley of the Mississippi…but which has disappeared before the inroads of savage hordes, leaving behind it no evidences of its existence…has something so fascinating and attractive in it."

This interpretation has long been overturned by legitimate science, and the Holston River mounds were certainly the work of pre-Cherokee Native Americans. Few artifacts from the Smithsonian expedition were recovered, but those that were are now housed in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. Interestingly enough, the report states that several plots of human remains were encountered, though the current whereabouts of the vast majority of them are uncertain.

Even the way in which the trail was marked is a topic of much speculation. Tradition has long held that the Cherokee marked trails by bending a sapling at a 90-degree angle, fracturing, but not breaking the tree. The tree would then likely thrive for many years with a characteristic bend, assuring future travelers that they were on the right path. While not unlikely, very little evidence exists to substantiate these claims. But even today, bent old-growth trees continue to lend themselves to the legend.

As with most widely traveled routes today, the Warriors' Path tended to follow major rivers and waterways. In Northeast Tennessee, that was the Holston River. Flowing through much of what is now Kingsport and Bristol, the Holston was a major hub of travel and commerce to nearly all travelers through the region. But sadly, areas of high traffic are usually areas with more than a few tragedies.

One such tragedy along the Warriors' Path is that of the "Battle" of Long Island, as it is sometimes called, though "Massacre of Long Island" is probably far more accurate. The American colonists were constantly vying for control of major waterways and other tactical locations just prior to the Revolution. One such strategic point was the Long Island of the Holston. The only problem was that it was a sacred ground for the Cherokee, and they refused to part with it. The colonists met the Cherokee leaders on the Long Island, a battle ensued, and the colonists arose victorious.

But this is where the two sides of the story diverge. History tells us that the Cherokee typically refused to take weapons of any kind onto their consecrated lands. It is now believed that they may have been duped into coming onto the island for "negotiations," left their weapons on the banks, and were slaughtered when they arrived.

Even in fairly recent memory, legends of the Warriors' Path and its inhabitants were formulated. One such story is that of Otter Cave, and its supposed store of gold! Legend tells of a cave inside the boundaries of Warriors' Path State Park. Supposedly, a group of Cherokee men, faced with the march westward on the Trail of Tears, decided to hide their gold and treasures deep inside the cavern in hopes that they would someday return to reclaim it. But, of course, they didn't. Scores of treasure-hunters have been looking for it since, and in one account they even succeeded, though this cannot be substantiated. Unfortunately, however, this cave was completely submerged when Fort Patrick Henry Dam was built, thus creating Patrick Henry Lake.

Today, Warrior's Path State Park in Kingsport lies along a portion of that ancient route, and Interstates 40 and 81 follow it rather closely in East Tennessee. And the story isn't over. Just as successive others utilized and expanded the path that they found before them, so too do we continue to utilize and expand it today. The significance of the Warriors' Path cannot be ignored, both for where it took its prehistoric and historic travelers, but also for where it is taking travelers today.

"Just because we don't usually write extensive histories of Highway 43 or Interstate 81, that does not undermine their importance," said Marty Silver, Warriors' Path State Park naturalist. He then added, "Understanding their pathway helps us understand our pathway. Just as they left signs, chips of flint or other implements, we leave signs for the future, too. The little they left behind and the oral history that survives has framed much of our entire understanding of a time long past. How are historians of the future going to interpret what we leave behind for them?"

Warriors' Path State Park is located approximately five miles from Interstate 81 in Kingsport. The park's phone number is 423-239-8531.

The Long Island of the Holston is located just off Netherland Inn Road, approximately nine miles from Warriors' Path State Park.

To read further, see the book The Warrior's Path by Casey Clabough, published by University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 2007, and Discarded Science: Ideas That Seemed Good at the Time by John Grant, published by Sterling Publishing Co., New York, N.Y., 2006.

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